

6/03/2009 65th D-Day Anniversary and Eisenhower Memorial

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June 3, 2009

Mr. Speaker, this Saturday, June 6, 2009 marks the 65th anniversary of D-Day. Sixty-five years ago, 150,000 Allied soldiers, many of them just teenagers, braved tumbling seas, inclement weather, waves of machinegun fire and millions of land mines to take a stretch of beach at a place called Normandy. The bravery and sacrifice of these young men began the Allied effort to liberate Europe from Nazi occupation during World War II. D-Day signaled the beginning of the end for the brutal fascist regime bent on global domination, and the return of hope to millions across the world.

With the enormity and significance of D-Day, it is often difficult for our minds to comprehend that such a historic undertaking was carried out by individual everyday Americans. However these individuals were not ordinary people. Rather, they possessed profound determination, courage and commitment to purpose and were led by extraordinary leaders with unrivaled character and unmatched vision.

No star shined brighter at this dangerous hour than one of our greatest Kansas sons, General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Dwight D. Eisenhower, a boy from Abilene, Kansas, grew up to serve America as Supreme Commander of the Allied forces during World War II and later as our 34th President. During the most difficult days of World War II, General Eisenhower made the crucial and controversial decisions necessary for victory.

With the responsibility of Operation Overlord, the largest amphibious invasion in the history of the world, General Eisenhower was fully aware that weather would play a critical factor in the success of D-Day and the safety of hundreds of thousands of troops. Under the full weight of these consequences, he elected to delay the massive undertaking by one day due to weather concerns. Faced with only marginally better weather forecast the next day, June 6, 1944, he ordered the commencement of the operation and took sole responsibility for this critical decision, a choice that ultimately determined the outcome of the war.

General Eisenhower's words to his troops on D-Day are inscribed at the national World War II Memorial. He is quoted, "You are about to embark on the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven for many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. I have full faith in your confidence, in your courage, devotion to duty and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full victory."

No one understood the historical enormity of D-Day more than General Eisenhower. His sense of responsibility was profound. Following the successful landing at Normandy, one of Eisenhower's aides discovered a note that Eisenhower had scribbled before the invasion. It read, "Our landings in the area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold, and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based upon the best information available. The troops, the air, and the Navy did all that bravery and devotion could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone." In these current times of great national challenges, we need leaders who possess the same sense of responsibility.

I am honored to serve as a Commissioner on the Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial Commission. The Commission was established by Congress in 1999, and it is charged with creating a permanent national memorial to our World War II hero and 34th President. Following a rigorous selection process, the commission has selected a world-renowned architect, Frank Gehry, as the lead designer for the memorial. The National Eisenhower Memorial will reflect Ike's great legacy and his optimism for America's future. It will illustrate his love of democracy and country, and his faith in international cooperation and understanding. In fact, his memorial will be the first to reach out to international visitors in their own languages.

President Eisenhower represents the best of Kansas and the best of America. This weekend, as we pause to remember those veterans who selflessly gave their lives for the cause of freedom on a foreign French beach 65 years ago, my hope is that we will reflect upon the principled leadership, conviction and commitment shown by General Eisenhower, a man who never forgot that his first responsibility was to lead a coalition to the best of his ability to victory. Indeed, we currently face tough and uncertain times ourselves, but in these difficult times, it is important to remember President Eisenhower's words: "America is exactly as strong as the initiative, courage, understanding and loyalty of our individual citizen."